

The Clarity of Scripture, Part 2

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:8; 1 Corinthians 14:33; 2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:16–21
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2. McLaren and Interpretive Complexity

Second, McLaren sees such incredible degrees of complexity, with even the most straightforward biblical teachings, that he hopelessly obscures what the Bible makes simple. One example, of many possible, would be his vacillation with regard to homosexuality. Though the issue is clear cut in Scripture (Genesis 19; Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; cf. Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:3-5; 1 Timothy 1:9, 10; Jude 7), McLaren remains unsure. He writes,

Frankly, many of us don't know what we should think about homosexuality. We've heard all sides but no position has yet won our confidence so that we can say "it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us." That alienates us from both the liberals and conservatives who seem to know exactly what we should think. Even if we are convinced that all homosexual behavior is always sinful, we still want to treat gay and lesbian people with more dignity, gentleness, and respect than our colleagues do. If we think that there may actually be a legitimate context for some homosexual relationships, we know that the biblical arguments are nuanced and multilayered, and the pastoral ramifications are staggeringly complex. We aren't sure if or where lines are to be drawn, nor do we know how to enforce with fairness whatever lines are drawn. ([Online Source](#))

In other words, McLaren sees so much complexity—in both the biblical prohibition and the contemporary practice regarding homosexual behavior—that he is unable to respond definitively to the question of homosexuality. While such a blatant disregard for the straightforward teaching of Scripture hardly needs a response, Doug Wilson's rebuttal seems particularly apropos.

If someone were to ask me whether the Bible teaches that Jesus went to Capernaum, I would say yes, it does. I would not be in agony over the question. It is not the most important question, but it is *clear*. If someone were to ask if the apostle Paul taught that homosexual behavior (both male and female forms) is the dead end result of idolatry, I would say yes again. No agony in the exegesis whatever. There is only agony if you are lusting after respect from the world, which they will not give to you unless you are busy making plenty of room for their lusts. And that is what the emergent movement is doing—this is really all about sex. And, conveniently enough, this has the added benefit of making room for evangelical lusts. Son of a gun. All that agony paid off. ([Online source](#))

For McLaren, other areas of ambiguity (or even outright disregard for the straightforward reading of Scripture) include doctrines like eternal punishment, eternal life, biblical inerrancy, divine sovereignty, divine masculinity, any doctrinal "distinctive," and any teaching that would exclude other denominations or even other religions from being enthusiastically embraced (cf. *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 19, 74, 81, 100, 113-14, 159-60). As he himself says, "The last thing I want is to get into

nauseating arguments about why this or that form of theology (dispensational, covenant, charismatic, whatever) or methodology (cell church, megachurch, liturgical church, seeker church, blah, blah, blah) is right . . ." (Ibid., 19).

Even *truth* itself is presented as a concept too complicated for most people to understand.

[One] other issue is absolute truth. . . . The levels of complexity are so deep that a lot of people have no idea what they're talking about. . . . Sometime the words *absolute truth* mean for people that they never have to give a second thought. I believe that to be a human being, although we can know truth, we are never in a position where we shouldn't stand open to the possibility of correction. When people use the word *truth*, they can mean a lot of different things. . . . But when you use a word like this, you're entering into a philosophical discussion that has been around since the time of the Greeks and is a very profound, difficult, sophisticated discussion. (*Relevant Magazine* interview, issue 21)

Ironically, in his most recent book, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, McLaren asserts that there are certain areas of doctrine on which he will speak clearly. He writes,

In one of my previous books, I said that clarity is sometimes overrated and that intrigue is correspondingly undervalued. But here I want to say—clearly—that it is tragic for anyone, especially anyone affiliated with the religion named after Jesus, not to be clear about what Jesus' message actually was. (*The Secret Message of Jesus*, 7).

Throughout the rest of *The Secret Message of Jesus*, McLaren proceeds to present Jesus' Kingdom message in a way that most closely aligns with the non-eschatological, social activism of twentieth century liberalism. But such an understanding hardly accounts for many of the clear New Testament statements as to the true essence of the gospel message (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21, for instance).

Moreover, by asserting that this "secret message" has just recently been discovered, McLaren is forced to deal with the question: "why hasn't this reading arisen sooner?" (Ibid., 211). While a refutation of McLaren's reasons (which are ultimately unconvincing) are outside the scope of this series, the following point remains: **By overturning the historic understanding of Scripture with a new, secret message of Jesus, McLaren has again undermined the clarity of Scripture. Only a Bible that is impossibly ambiguous can fit in McLaren's neo-gnostic model.**

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